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Biological warfare study was secret at Minn. campus

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ST. PAUL, Minn. — Highly guarded government-sponsored analysis of suspected biological warfare agents has been under way at the University of Minnesota for about two months.

The work, conducted at the St. Paul campus plant pathology laboratory under the direction of Professor Chester J. Mirocha, was done without the knowledge of university officials and was undertaken despite university policies prohibiting classified or secret research.

Although some of the test results have been made public in recent weeks, many details, including methods of analyses and specific levels of chemicals found, remain an official secret, according to the State Department. State Department officials said they would eventually release the full results.

Mirocha's work has been so guarded that employees in his laboratory were unaware until recently that they were analyzing plant samples collected by the intelligence community from sites in Southeast Asia, where the government suspects that Vietnamese troops have waged chemical warfare. The leaf and stem samples were analyzed for mycotoxin, a natural chemical poison that the U.S. government suspects the Soviets of developing into a potential biological weapon.

Mycotoxins are frequently found in moldy animal feed and produce much the same reaction in animals that they do in humans. Those reactions include skin blisters, internal bleeding, convulsions and death.

The project drew immediate criticism from some officials, who cited past controversies over consulting projects undertaken by individual professors as well as the university's past involvement in development of biological warfare agents.

"I was totally unaware of this," said Stan Kegler, vice-president of institutional relations, and the university's acting president. Kegler said he should have been informed of the project. University president C. Peter Magrath was out of town and unavailable for comment.

"There is no place at our university for secret research, especially if it applies to biological weapons," said Martin Dworkin, a microbiology professor. He was highly critical of the university's research during the 1960s into a crop-killing disease that had potential for use as a biological weapon.

"If it's secret, it shouldn't be going on," Dworkin said.

Robert Hexter, chairman of the university research committee, said he was also unaware of the project, adding that the university would be reluctant to get involved in any work relating to biological warfare. "Universities don't wage war," he said.

Mirocha said he did not inform higher officials of the project because he was unaware until recently of the purpose of the analyses. State Department officials said that the secrecy was necessary to ensure that the test results were unbiased and free from political complications. Department spokesman Fred Selick said that much of the information on the mycotoxin project remained classified. "We'll release it when the time is right," Selick said.

Laboratory employees said one of the toxins within the compound chemical was found at levels nearly 10 times the amounts normally found in animal feed containing the mold. The levels were much higher than

those that produce ill effects in animals, they said.

Mirocha said he considers the mycotoxin project a service to the country and stated that he would have performed the analyses even if he had known their purpose.

Results of Mirocha's tests were cited in a recent speech in West Germany by Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr., who was on an acknowledged public relations campaign to stress the Soviet threat and to emphasize the need to match Soviet military strength.

Haig said he had positive evidence that chemical warfare was being waged in Indochina. But his remarks were later toned down by the State Department, which termed the evidence "preliminary."

The scientific community has reacted with skepticism to the disclosures, and there has been speculation that the administration is using the information to muster anti-Soviet sentiment and gain support for U.S. military buildups.